

I Didn't Sign Up For This: Why Celebrities Are Not Role Models By Default

by Brande Victorian

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Why It Matters: Celebrities Have a Moral Responsibility to Their Fans

by Denisha Jones

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- ¹ There are two things that bother me most about the response to Chris Brown and Rihanna's assumed reunion. One is the fact that people who looked at Rihanna like a trashy R&B wild child days before are now pretending to suddenly be so concerned about her emotional and physical wellbeing that they have penned open letters to her about her love life. The other is the idea that Rihanna owes it to young girls everywhere not to go back to the man who physically assaulted her because she's a role model.
- ² Let's be real about something. Rihanna hasn't had the potential to be a role model since she panned de replay, and even then I'm not sure that's what she wanted to be. But since the assumed good girl has obviously gone bad she has repeatedly shouted from the roof tops that she is not a role model, she does not wish to be a role model, and she will not adjust her life to be a role model. Why aren't we letting her talk that talk?
- ³ I understand the logic that once you become a performer your private life and a lot of the personal decisions you make are put on display for millions of fans and the public at large to critique, but that doesn't make you a role model, that makes you visible. I feel the same way when it comes to the backlash against rappers. Of course they could all stand to make the content of their music a little less misogynistic and a lot more purposeful, but can we really expect men who literally just stepped out of the hood and got \$10 million put in their pocket to talk about their life experiences to suddenly encourage behavior they know nothing about? I mean is there some sort of remedial thug program aspiring rappers go through once they get a deal? Of course not.
- ⁴ Do I think there is a certain amount of responsibility that comes along with being a person that influential? Yes, but only to the extent that if you are engaging in questionable behavior you should never encourage anyone else to do so, or suggest ridiculous things to minors [as Too Short did in an advice video in February, 2012]. Do I think it's fair to put pressure on celebrities to lead straight and narrow lives to appease the images we want to

- ¹ In a recent *British Vogue* interview, R&B superstar Rihanna reveals that her image is "a piece of art" and that it is not her job to be a role model to her young fans. Rihanna believes that her job is to "make music." "That's it." Her words are similar to basketball star Sir Charles Barkley's in a *Nike* ad. In the ad, Barkley charged: "I'm not paid to be a role model. [...] Just because I dunk a basketball, doesn't mean I should raise your kids."
- ² It's easy to sympathize with Rihanna and Barkley, who just want to do their jobs (albeit publicly). Celebrities are fallible human beings who seldom ask or expect fans to emulate their off-stage or off-field behavior. We don't expect store managers or waiters to always be upstanding citizens outside of work. Rihanna's comments raise a challenging question: Should celebrities be held to a different standard?
- ³ Some commenters have answered "yes," putting a heavy burden on celebrities. Others have answered "no," absolving them of blame for the influence they wield. But while everyone else responds to the issue as though there's only one question to answer, I think there are really two questions, each with a different answer:
- ⁴ Question 1) Should we call celebrities "role models" and encourage children to emulate them? My own answer to this question is an unequivocal "no." I certainly don't want my children using Charlie Sheen as a life model. I'd be dumbfounded if many people disagreed with me on this.
- ⁵ Question 2) Should celebrities realize that they are role models, whether they want to be or not, and behave accordingly?
- ⁶ Once we frame the issue this way, it's hard to escape the conclusion that ... well, yes, they should. Of course they should.
- ⁷ Part of the problem with the above argument is that it compares celebrities (people who are seen frequently by the young) with waiters and store managers--folks who, if they do their jobs correctly, are barely noticed or remembered at all. Compare celebrities with any other high-visibility or high-exposure role, and the game changes: Are coaches, teachers, parents, priests, church youth group leaders, political leaders, gang leaders, high school star athletes, and camp counselors role models? Children look up to them and emulate them, so yes

hold of them? Not at all.

⁵ Being a role model is an awesome responsibility that many are not cut out for and few have the ability to live up to. Do you consider every leader in your community a role model? What about executives on your job? Sure, tons of people take direction from these figures and look to them for guidance but when you think about the positive context in which the term role model is used, it's a title we don't bestow upon ordinary, everyday people hastily. They have to earn it. So why should celebrities be any different?

⁶ At some point we all have to take responsibility for ourselves and the influences we succumb to. And when it comes to adolescents and teenagers, it's up to their parents to set appropriate examples of who to emulate and who to excuse. As someone who never got into celebrity worship, I've never expected [...] the actors and musical artists I am a fan of to do anything more than entertain me. Sometimes they do it with their personal lives, but I only expect it from their professional ones. Sure, sometimes the things they do off-camera or off-screen disappoint me, but that's likely because I created an image in my head of who they were in lieu of the ability to really get to know who they actually are. And that's why a celebrity could never be a role model to me. I don't know enough about them.

⁷ If you want to model your career off of a famous person who's made it big in an industry with a talent you share or wear a design some singer rocked, go for it. But when it comes to romance, relationships, and the things that matter when the paparazzi are gone, it's not up to an entertainer to lead you in the way that you should go unless they've demonstrated they want to because they have their fans best interest at heart and they have a lifestyle that's worth modeling. Otherwise you're on your own—as you should be.

they are.

⁸ In effect, fame creates the same sorts of responsibilities as involuntary parenthood and teaching. You may not want to be a role-model, but because your children (or someone else's) see you more often than they see most other people, you now are one. It's not something you get to edit out of the experience. You don't get a choice. Certain adult activities – teaching, acting, singing, professional sports, unprotected sex – carry responsibilities of being a role-model as a known price-tag. If you accept the activity, you also need to accept the role-model consequence.

⁹ Celebrities (and their fans) often argue that is an unfair burden and that the real responsibility lies with parents. However, this response is a bit naive and assumes that all children live in two-parent home in a safe middle-class suburb.

¹⁰ Regrettably, many fans exist who may have *no other* role models of success aside from celebrities. Not everyone has good parents. A kid with an abusive, alcoholic mother and deadbeat, missing father isn't at fault for this situation. Saying she should use her parents as role models is akin to saying she should have no role models, no moral compass at all. It is a natural human instinct to emulate others. If her parents won't do, she'll find someone who seems--even if just marginally--better. The most likely targets are those who are high visibility, including celebrities. Celebrities may not like this, but they need to be aware of it.

¹¹ Even if the parents are good, they often find themselves struggling against the influence of other role models who, by virtue of time spent directly or indirectly with their children, wield considerable influence. Studies conducted on which people most influence youth find consistently that parents, even good parents, rank low on the list. Friends and celebrities wield more influence the older children get. As much as we might expect parents to influence their kids, they don't have as much opportunity or leverage to do so as is often imagined.

¹² Should celebrities, camp counselors, high school star athletes, politicians, and gang members be role models? Not always.

¹³ But are they? And do they have responsibility for the examples they set?

¹⁴ Yes, they are. And yes, they do.